Re-Signifying the Classics: Actualizing, Interpreting, Improvising

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1. Introduction

The thesis I will defend in this paper is that the process of normativity that is at work in the link between Classicism and Neo-Classicism is paradigmatically epitomized by the transformational dynamics of improvisational processes. In order to argue for this thesis I will begin by critically discussing some commonplaces about improvisation. Then I will focus on the notions of classicism and neoclassicism. I will conclude by showing how the normative logic of improvisation enlightens their relationship.

2. Improvisation and Neoclassicism

Talking about improvisation in a book concerned with the significance of Neoclassicism seems, at first glance, an odd choice. Improvisation is the artistic practice of inventing while performing and it may seem that, whatever the artistic forms (architecture, literature, painting, sculpture, music, theatre, etc.) and the historical periods considered, it does not easily fit the criteria of the contents and the values ordinarily attributed to neoclassical art: equilibrium, proportion between parts, formal coherence, order, rationality, balance and so on.

In other words, improvisation seems rather more romantic than neoclassic, or Dionysian rather than Apollonian (cf. Nietzsche 2008; Fig. 1). As a matter of fact, traditionally – or, better said, in certain important traditions – many of the properties of romantic genius, and in particular the quality of spontaneous creativity beyond conventional rules, are related to improvisation. Moreover, while neo-classicist aesthetics is regulated by criteria of perfection transmitted from the classical art that one intends to recover, at least according to some scholars the aesthetics of improvisation is the aesthetics of imperfection. Put another way, such scholars[2] believe that since improvisation takes place in the here and now, without adhering to precise instructions, artists face the risk of a necessarily unexpected performance

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[2] See Gioia 1988; Hamilton 1990.

situation, and are required to make use of the forms and the materials available in the moment of the performance. Therefore, the audience must be satisfied with imperfect artistic results, which would be regarded as unsatisfactory had they been the outcome of a creativity not due to improvisation. Thus, while Neoclassicism strives to recover the lost perfection of classical art, improvisation (as has been argued in particular for jazz improvisation) by its nature tends towards the absence of form, towards excess and the breakdown of structural coherence. In other words, improvisation is the imperfect art, an art that pays the price of the inevitable lack of preparation of the artists who practice it.

In my view, this 'imperfectionist' view of the aesthetics of improvisation is conceptually wrong. This is not the proper place for enumerating in detail the reasons for my position. But let me briefly explain what I mean by saying that the 'imperfectionist' view is misleading. On the one hand, although romantic art may be described, in a sense, as improvisational – in that there are elements of improvisation in romantic creativity – improvisation is not to be reduced to a spontaneous invention *ex nihilo*, which necessarily dooms the pursuit of artistic perfection to failure. On the other hand, as I have argued elsewhere (Bertinetto 2013), improvisation is a paradigmatic and performative example of the reflexive dimension of aesthetic judgment, that, for its part, does not strive for perfection in a formalistic sense, but for aesthetic success (these are, as Kant has shown, two quite different things; cf. Kant 1916). Aesthetic success occurs when the object experienced becomes the example of a shared normativity that can not be presupposed as given. As elaborated by Luigi Pareyson (2010), it is a normativity that, in the artistic realm, is generated by artistic creativity which does not simply apply already established rules of production, but invents ways and means of creation while making (see Bertinetto 2009) .

However, it still seems true that improvisation has little to do with Neoclassicism, since Neoclassicism seems to be based on the imitation and revival of ancient art and improvisation is generally conceived of as the opposite of imitation. For the imitation of a past artistic achievement is not something *ex improviso*, since it is based on a model which is *seen* before producing the artwork. It would seem conceptually contradictory to argue that improvisation plays a role when a model exists or, more precisely, that improvisers (those who do not see in advance) perform what a model allows them to predict (or, better to say, to preview).

However, this idea is also partial and, therefore, mistaken. As for example the entire history of jazz shows, imitation is not the opposite of improvisation: on the one hand it does not exclude or impede improvisation *per se*, but instead may offer the resources for its concrete development. On the other hand, imitation is not exclusively passive, but interpretational and

in felicitous cases even creative. In the very same way, behavioural habits that feed improvisational practices are not the opposite of spontaneous creativity. Habits (including the ones based on models and gestural patterns) provide a basis for creativity and are shaped and continuously transformed in a creative way (cf. Bertinetto-Bertram, manuscript).

Thus, by concluding this preliminary excursus on improvisation, the first idea I would like to suggest is that, if we understand Neoclassicism as a kind of artistic genre or style that is rooted in its historical conditions, but can cyclically recur, in different guises, in different historical periods, the idea of neoclassical improvisation is not a *contradictio in adjecto*. The example of the French composer Francis Poulenc, commonly acknowledged as one of the leading representatives of twentieth-century musical Neoclassicism, seems to confirm this idea, for he produced 15 pieces entitled *Improvisations*. Yet, one may contend that those neoclassical pieces are only entitled 'improvisations', while they actually are in all respects compositions. More specifically, they are compositions that belong to those types of pieces (like *capriccios* and *fantasias*) that are written with the explicit artistic intention that the performances of them seem to be improvised on the moment. Nonetheless, ontologically, these kinds of musical works are indeed compositions and not improvisations (see Bertinetto 2016, 134).

Hence, the presence of works classified as improvisations in the repertoire of Neoclassicism does not sweep away doubts about the incompatibility between neoclassical aesthetics and improvisation. At the same time, this does not exclude the possibility that a real improvisation may be neoclassical in style. For example, many describe some of Keith Jarrett's piano improvisations as neoclassical. In some musical criticism this label has a rather negative connotation:[3] it implies that the music of Keith Jarrett in recent years has become sclerotic, because it is bound to the boring and stale repetition of a model without producing anything new. Yes, Jarrett's neoclassical pianistic style is improvised, but his improvisations are not experimental or innovative. They simply are the repetition of the same old stuff. From this example we can draw the conclusion that nothing prevents improvisational practices from being neoclassical, at least in this negative aesthetic sense.

However, there is another sense in which Jarrett's music has been defined as neoclassical. It is neoclassical, in particular, due to the composure and brightness of the sound. As such, Neoclassicism, as a particular musical style, is a part of Keith Jarrett's aesthetic resources. Of course, it just one among others which may seem to contrast with traditional neoclassical

[3] Cf. http://freefalljazz.altervista.org/blog/?p=12816.

standards: for instance “heartrending romanticism”, “minimalism”, and “arrhythmic atonality”.[4] In any case, it remains that therefore nothing seems to prevent improvisation from being stylistically neoclassical in this positive aesthetic sense. As a matter of fact, as Gioia (1988) writes, many jazzmen – including Lester Young, Wes Montgomery, Bill Evans, Count Basie, Stan Getz, John Lewis, Miles Davis, and Paul Desmond – may be properly defined as neoclassic, in that their music is informed by principles such as moderation, self-control, emotional restraint, care, economy, sense for formal structures and understatement, that are ordinarily considered typically – I also could have rightly said: *classically* – neo-classical.

3. Neoclassicism as a moment of the classics

This being said, my principal theoretical interest here lies elsewhere. Rather than simply suggesting that, all things considered, improvisation is not incompatible with neoclassical aesthetics, I contend that the very concept of Neoclassicism (not only musical Neoclassicism, but Neoclassicism generally speaking) is the product of a cultural logic of an appropriative and actualizing stripe which is the very soul of Classicism itself and which, in hindsight, follows the dynamic structure of transformational signification which is proper to improvisational processes.

My thesis is hence the following: Neoclassicism is a moment of the formation of the classics and this process is a retroactive and actualising movement of making sense, i.e. of aesthetic signification, that is epitomized by improvisational recursive processes.

In order to clarify this idea, I will briefly examine the notion of the ‘classic’ by following theoretical suggestions from scholars whose ideas on Classicism, I apologize for the pun, are now classic, meaning that they have become referential studies with considerable normative power.

Wladislaw Tatarkiewiecz in his essay about "*Les Quatre significations du mot 'classique'*" (1958), distinguished between four meanings of the concept of the “classic”:

(1) Classic may mean something of first class, i.e. something considered as a perfect model.
(2) Classic is a synonym for ancient Greek or Roman (or indicating the acme of those cultures).
(3) Classic is a modern historical style that aims to conform with the ancient models.

[4] http://www.lynndavidnewton.com/music/kj/JarrettSketch.html.

(4) Classic means the aesthetic category indicating harmony, equilibrium, and moderation and, in this sense, the term suggests the opposition with styles like gothic, baroque, romanticism and primitivism.

If we consider definitions (1) and (3), the idea is that Classicism has a normative value that is cross-temporal and, for this reason, it is adapted to different historical periods and cultural situations. Hans-Georg Gadamer famously included this cross-temporality or contemporaneity in the very definition of the "classical". Classical, he wrote, is "a kind of timeless present that is contemporaneous with every other present" (Gadamer 2004, 288). Indeed, the aesthetic values and criteria mentioned in point (4) are classical, in that they are often considered to be universally and cross-temporally valid.

As argued by Salvatore Settis (2004, 71-73), the connection between definitions (1) and (2) (ancient culture as a model) and definitions (3) and (4) (the ideal of a restoration of an ancient model in a modern style on the basis of a normative value) arises out of a logic which holds that Classicism is generated at the same time as Neoclassicism. This logic is at the same time *narrative* and *normative*. In other words, Classicism is generated by means of posing an ideal model of perfection, which is identified with a past culture to which moderns look in order to legitimate themselves with the argument that they are again reaching that perfection. So, paradigmatically, Renaissance and Classical styles are generated at the same time! That is why, as Settis (2004, 54-61, 79-80) rightly observes, the classical must die in order to be reborn; and at each rebirth it takes a different form. Hence, the notion of Classicism seems to be paradoxical. The paradox is that the classical – as a normative ideal – is transformed and renewed by and in the different and new situations in which its normativity is enforced. In other words, Classicism is posed (and always re-proposed) by Neoclassicism. But, although apparently paradoxical, this dialectic relation between Classicism and Neoclassicism is not surprising, if we think that this is the same dialectics ruling the famous *querelle des anciens et de modernes*. The normative power of the *ancients* is generated by the way that the *moderns* seek them out for cultural legitimation. In this sense – as argued by early German Romanticists – the quarrel dissolves, if one considers that the superiority of the ancients would not exist without the attribution of such superiority on the part of the moderns, who, therefore, precisely thanks to this attribution, acknowledge the historical character of art (the rooting of art in its own historical conditions). In this way, *moderns* become *like* the *ancients* at the very moment in which, while avowing Classicism, they express their specific historical difference (see Vercellone-Bertinetto-Garelli 2003, 61).

Here, the Gadamerian thesis of the contemporaneity of the classic is thus substantiated by the understanding, which Salvatore Settis accurately articulates, that the classic returns cyclically. This means that every epoch, and every cultural movement, posits its own classic, its normative ideal, through a narration aimed at its own specific historical and cultural legitimation; put otherwise, it is aimed at producing a normative frame that gives meaning to itself.

As a result, the two main definitions of the classic – the classic as an unalterable and timeless system and a reservoir of universal values, and the classic as a plural and dynamic process intertwined with historical evolution – are two sides of the same coin which unites together historical *narrativity* and *normative validity*. As it happens, paradigmatically, in the manipulations of totalitarian regimes (Fig. 2), the nostalgia for the classic that characterizes Neoclassicism in its search for authenticity and self-legitimation reveals, accidentally and implicitly, the specific characteristics of the present age that is attempting, in this way, to legitimize itself. In the same way, but this time consciously and explicitly, the recognition of the recurrence of historiographical schemes and iconographic formulas (as for instance in Aby Warburg: cf. Settis 2004, 93-101), which are reborn in different cultures, shows the repetition of cultural patterns through historical diversity.

At the end of the day, it is precisely the awareness of the otherness of the classics – posited as a model – that also makes us aware of the specificity and novelty of the present. This emerges most clearly in examples of Neoclassicism of colonial architecture (Figs. 3 & 4). The attempt to legitimize one's own cultural identity by underlining the continuity with the (classical) past in order to show one's belonging to the continuity of a historical narration, only serves to emphasise – through the relationship with the striking diversity of the context, as well as by virtue of unavoidable philological discrepancies – the specific differences of one's own cultural situation. Neoclassical architecture in colonial settings merely exhibits the invention of the classic, as a normative standard, when such normativity is applied to reaffirm a continuity that is unintentionally, but radically, denied.

As Settis (2004, 109) writes, this generation of cultural narrativity and normativity also shows that the classics are re-classified each time in a process of continuous de-signification and re-signification that reflects a specific cultural project. Classicism, as normative concept, functions by virtue of this dynamic process of retro-action – in the form either of a *comeback* or of a *removal.*

Even when, as in Busoni (1921), Neoclassicism is not meant as a nostalgic rescue and recovery of past and lost models, but as a means of renewal, Neoclassicism consists precisely

in this comeback which posits the classic, while generating a normative validity. Since every neo-movement or neo-style (like neo-baroque, neo-romanticism etc.) is a comeback of this kind, in each of these cultural movements or styles the same dialectical logic is at work: the retroactive logic that binds together Classicism and Neoclassicism, articulating them in a parallel and reciprocal way. So, in a sense, the specificity of Neoclassicism, as opposed to other neo-movements, consists in that specific formal normativity epitomized by Winckelmann's "noble simplicity and calm grandeur" (Winckelmann 1986) . This, however, does not rule out that the reference to the past, and its actualisation, is detached and ironic, as famously in Stravinsky's *Pulcinella* (Fig. 5) which, as Edward Cone wrote, resulted in "a complete reinterpretation and transformation of the earlier style" (Carr 2014: 202), and, especially, of Pergolesi's model. On the other hand, a total identification with the stylistic ideals of the past risks falling into kitsch, as often happens in the Neoclassicism of totalitarian regimes and certain colonial buildings. But it also may occur in other political situations and artistic domains. For example, at least according to many critics, this is the case in Wynton Marsalis' neo-classical jazz style.

Yet, Marsalis' cultural project of canonization of the jazz heritage is paramount for making explicit the connection between Neoclassicism and Classicism. His neo-classical, restorative, and conservative project – which is, intentionally, the direct opposite of Miles Davis' transformational view of jazz – is aimed at establishing jazz as American Classical Music (cf. Hamilton 2010), restoring the pure jazz of its origins, which was supposedly lost in the development of free jazz, fusion and electronic jazz. This project seems paradoxical: it contributes to fossilizing or musealizing an artistic praxis born of hybridization, inclusion, movement, interaction, and improvisation by selecting a historical narrative devoted to exclusionary purification. There is nothing more contradictory than wanting to pursue an art based on improvisation through the imposition of a canonical model from which to copy. Moreover, although the desire to attribute the dignity of art to a popular musical practice is understandable, there is a kind of will to power behind this move, assimilating the culture of the oppressed to the ideal normativity of the oppressors. Nevertheless, Marsalis's conservative Neoclassicism clearly follows the gesture of re-signification, actualization and appropriation that characterizes the birth of the classic through its return within and through the neoclassic.

4. The improvisational normativity of Neoclassicism

But what about improvisation? What does improvisation have to do with this link between Classicism and Neoclassicism? The thesis I will now defend is that the process of normativity that is at work in that conceptual generative link is clearly and paradigmatically epitomized by the transformational structure of improvisational processes.

In fact, in improvisation the sense of the process is constructed retroactively. More concretely: A pianist plays a series of notes which, given that they do not depend on a pre-established plan, receive meaning thanks to what follows. For example, this might occur through the response of the trumpet player or the way in which the drummer accepts or rejects the pianist's invitation. Even in other improvisational artistic practices, what happens progressively shapes the normative context for what follows, but the following at the same time transforms meanings and values of what has preceded it. The norm (including the artistic standards of success) is formed and transformed procedurally, by its very application in the performance situation, so that even the mistake has a particular status: it does not depend on the violation of pre-existing instructions, but on an ineffective reaction to the unexpected.

Hence, improvisational practices are a continuous dialectic process of de- and re-signification, beginning with the traditions (whether of styles, conventions, techniques) that constitute their starting points. Their normative force is continuously re-signified in different ways: They may be appropriative, respectful, celebratory, affirmative, ironic, derogatory, etc. As in the paradigmatic example of John Coltrane's version of Broadway waltz *My Favorite Things* (Fig. 6), improvisational performances signify (on) the artistic background they use and abuse as their starting material (cf. Monson 1996, 97-132).

In so doing, improvisational practices epitomize art as whole. For, coming back to Pareyson's definition, as a kind of making that invents the way of creation while making, artistic creativity is a kind of improvisation that signifies (on) other art (and on forms of cultural practice). Although artistic traditions and practice offer the background for the new artworks (in that each new artwork gets its meaning and value within or in relation to a certain cultural context), each new artwork is *ex improviso* in relation to art as human practice and, at the same time, re-signifies art as a whole (Bertinetto 2017).

In this regard, Picasso's *Demoiselles de Avignon* (Fig. 7) offers a very famous example in the field of painting. The "primitivist" style of the shapes of the girls depicted constitutes a kind of use (and abuse) of the classical tradition (in terms of formal equilibrium and elegance) through the filter of Picasso's interpretation of another contemporary classic, Cezanne (who, in a way, is signified as a classic precisely by virtue of Picasso's painting; Fig. 8). The American

philosopher Joseph Margolis observed that this celebrated artwork is an improvisation: its aesthetic value emerges out of Picasso's appropriative interpretations of different traditions, although it is not reducible to them. Hence, "Picasso's innovation", as Margolis wrote, "cannot be routinely reconciled with any of the would-be canons of well-formed painting up to the intrusion of *Les demoiselles*" (Margolis 1999, 93-94) . Yet, as Carlo Ginzburg (2000, 127-147) pointed out, the echo of classical art is recognizable in the shapes of Picasso's figures. The classical offers the cultural basis for Picasso's innovation, and Picasso's innovation emerges out of the tradition. It creatively signifies (on) the classical and the classical, in turn, appears through the filter of the innovation.

This reciprocal feedback between tradition and innovation is in play in every significant new artwork. Its 'logic', as it were, is the retroactive and transformative logic of improvisation. As such, this logic is the motivating soul of Neoclassicism as an element of the continuous self-development of the classics. By way of conclusion, we may notice that it is perhaps no accident that Picasso himself, whose entire work exhibits the improvisational creative dialectic between tradition and innovation, collaborated to the staging of Stravinsky's ballet *Pulcinella* (Fig. 9), which is a neoclassic masterpiece.

This particular historical fact may be taken as a kind of symbol of Neoclassicism as that cultural phenomenon of re-signification, actualization, appropriation and interpretation of the classic which makes the classic, both narratively and normatively, artistically vivid, aesthetically effective, and, especially, philosophically powerful. Yet, obviously enough, just as in improvisational artistic practices, the success of this operation is not guaranteed. Neoclassical attempts to generate historical and normative legitimation may fail and instead exhibit a soulless and pretentious self-conceit. Failure tends to happens when neoclassical works show no self-understanding of the historical character of normativity and, reciprocally, of the normative character of history.

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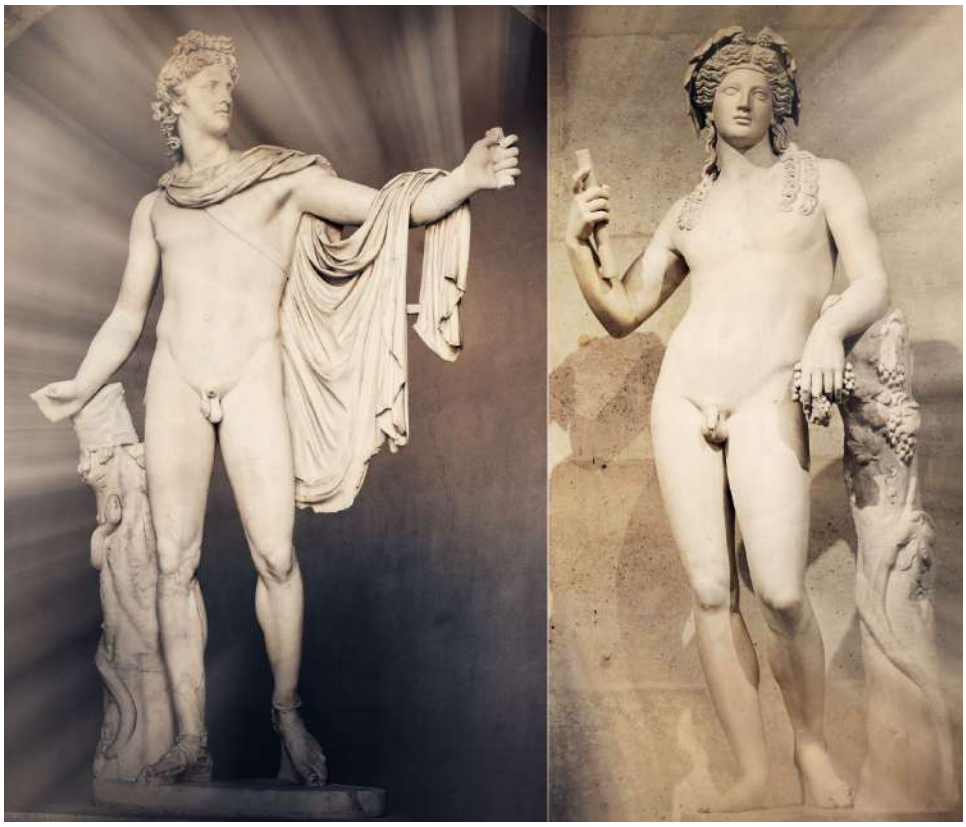

Fig. 1 Apollo and Dionysus

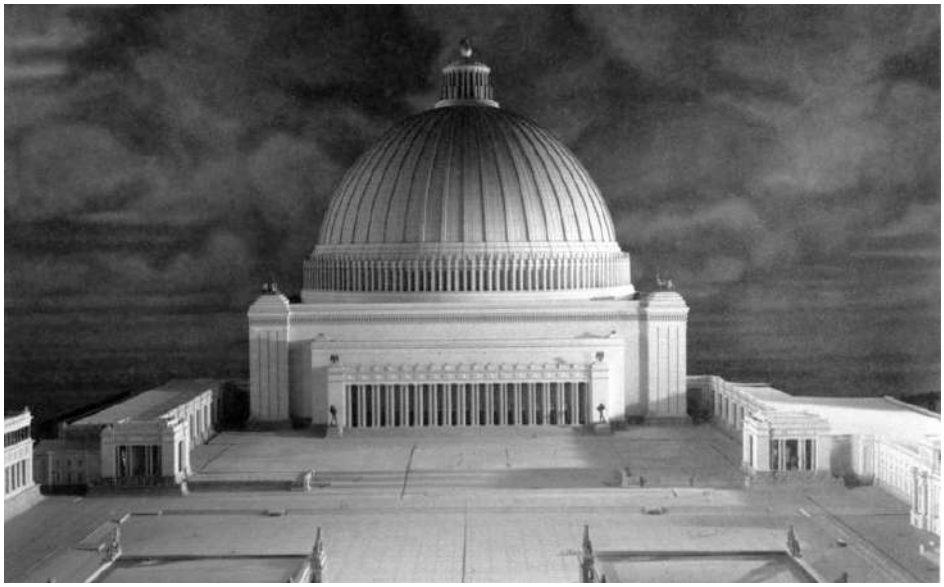

Fig. 2 Albert Speer's model for the Kuppelhalle in Berlin (1939)

Fog. 3 Marché Bonsecours (Montreal, 1847)

Fig. 4 Jefferson Memorial (Washington D.C, 1943)

Fig. 5 Pablo Picasso: Costume design for *Pulcinella* (1920)

Fig. 6 Cover of John Coltrane's *My Favorite Things* (1961)

Fig. 7 Pablo Picasso, *Les Damoiselles d'Avignon* (1907)

Fig. 8 Paul Cézanne, *Les grandes baigneuses* (1894-1905)

Fig. 9 Pablo Picasso: drawing for the 1920 production of Stravinsky's *Pulcinella* at the Paris Opera Ballet.